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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR URGES RESTRAINT IN PRESSING ABU MAZEN, ASSAD

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (C) Russian Ambassador Gennady Tarasov and the Ambassador reviewed Israeli-Palestinian progress in implementing the Sharm al-Sheikh commitments and Syria-Lebanon developments during a March 11 conversation. In response to the Ambassador's question about whether Russian Middle East envoy Kalugin would visit Israel next week as part of the Russian delegation to the dedication of Israel's new Holocaust museum, Tarasov said Kalugin was not part of the delegation, and that he did not know anything about Kalugin's current activities or plans.

Post-Sharm Progress

2. (C) Tarasov noted Russian concerns that the Israelis and Palestinians appear to be "stuck" in efforts to transfer security authority in West Bank cities and in meeting other Sharm commitments. The GOR, he said, understands the "predicaments" facing Abu Mazen -- e.g., the prospect of a strong Hamas showing in July's elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council -- and wants to avoid putting pressure on him. The international community should help ensure the fulfillment of Sharm commitments to bolster Abu Mazen's position.

3. (C) The Ambassador concurred with Russian concerns, but stressed that Sharm spoke only to broad outcomes, not to implementation details. Just as they often have in the past, the Israelis and Palestinians are now grappling with bridging differences over details that matter to each side. Sharon, for example, worries that a terrorist attack resulting from inadequate security arrangements around an abandoned checkpoint could derail progress in the overall peace effort. At the same time, the Ambassador commented, current differences between the Israelis and Palestinians -- for example, on the lifting of roadblocks around Jericho -- appear amenable to compromise. Tarasov asked about Gen. Ward's role in bridging such differences. The Ambassador replied that, while one of Gen. Ward's mandates was to help the sides resolve differences on security matters, Gen. Ward would be careful to avoid letting the sides turn to him too early and too often. The sides need to try to resolve differences between themselves, to the extent possible.

Syria-Lebanon

4. (C) The GOR, Tarasov said, shares the international view that the time has come for Syria to leave Lebanon. Less clear, he added, is how this should happen "pragmatically." Too much "frontal pressure" on Syria could lead to a counter-reaction. SARG officials, Tarasov said, have told the GOR that they are ready to withdraw immediately from Lebanon, but need face-saving cover. Tarasov stressed that the international community must closely monitor the impact of a Syrian withdrawal on Lebanon. "It's easy to talk about democracy," he said, but one must account for Hizballah. An unstable Lebanon would be the worst outcome. Pointing to UN envoy Larsen's planned visit to Damascus on March 12, Tarasov said the GOR assesses that the SARG already understands the international message behind UNSCR 1559. The U.S. concurs with Russia on the goal of a Syrian withdrawal, the Ambassador commented, but is not sure that President Assad appreciates the meaning of 1559 and the need to set forth a realistic and concrete withdrawal plan.

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